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AUTHOR Pearson, Judy C.
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INSTITUTION Ohio State Univ., Columbus. Coll. of Education.
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ABSTRACT

Every day, observations and predictions are made about people's gender on the basis of their communicative behaviors and the roles individuals play in their culture. Although interest in the relationship between biological sex and communication may be traced to the beginning of this century, much of the research on gender and communication has been produced over the past 15 years. Examining the history of gender and communication reveals how these topics are related. Communication is related to gender because communication identifies roles and encourages or discourages the internalizing of predispositions that relate to masculinity and femininity. Gender also relates to communication because it influences the specific use of verbal and nonverbal codes, languages of the masculine and feminine subcultures. Two major problems account for the difficulty in effective and appropriate communication across these subcultures: (1) it is assumed that gender and sex are synonyms; and (2) perceptions of behavior are often confused with actual behavior. The dilemmas in this area can be solved if people are willing to separate their perceptions of themselves or of others from the behaviors that they or others exhibit, and if gender and sex are viewed as distinctive constructs. Sex refers to biological differences between people; gender refers to internalized predispositions about masculine and feminine roles. (Twenty-two references are attached.) (MM)

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MONOGRAPH

INTERRELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN GENDER AND COMMUNICATION

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Judy C. Pearson
Ohio University

Are men or women more likely to use the words "puce," "aquamarine," "ecru," and "mauve"? If a speaker discussed such matters as "carburetors," "pistons," "overhead cams," and "cylinders," would you guess that the speaker was male or female? Is the chief executive officer of a Fortune 500 company more likely to be a man or a woman? In almost any organization, are men or women more likely to be chosen as secretaries? Every day, observations and predictions are made about people's gender on the basis of their communicative behaviors and the roles individuals play in our culture. Gender and communication are not unfamiliar topics, though many people do not realize the extent to which these topics have been studied.

Although interest in the relationship between biological sex and communication may be traced to the beginning of this century (Stopes, 1908), much of the research on gender and communication has been produced over the past fifteen years. The relationships among women, men, and communication are complex and deserve careful scrutiny. In this monograph, some of those issues are considered.

HOW ARE GENDER AND COMMUNICATION RELATED?

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In order to understand how gender and communication are related, the history of both topics is relevant. The choice of the word "gender" itself is important to the discussion. Before the mid-1970s, the term "sex" was used to refer to biological differences that existed between people. In studies on "sex differences," people were categorized simply on the basis of their biological differences and of observed differences in communicative behavior. For example, researchers observed that women smiled more frequently than men (Argyle, 1975), that men speak more loudly than do women (Markel, Prebor, & Brandt, 1972), that women are more likely to be observed or watched than are men (Argyle & Williams, 1969), and that men are more likely than women to interrupt others (Zimmerman & West, 1975).

In 1974, Sandra Bem created a new conceptualization of sex. Before this time, people had been categorized according to masculinity and femininity measures—as possessing more or less of each of these measures. In other words, masculinity was placed at one end of a continuum and femininity was placed on the other end, as illustrated in the figure below.

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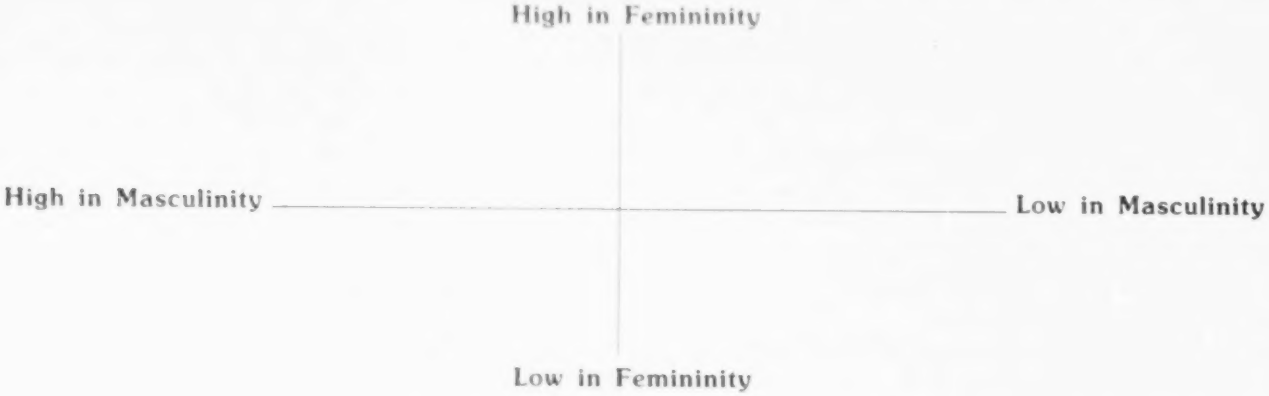
Masculinity — **Femininity**

Through answering a series of questions, an individual would be categorized as masculine, as feminine, or as being somewhere between these two extremes. One should observe that, in using this method, the more masculine a person indicated he or she was, the less feminine the person would rate. An individual could not be high in both masculinity and femininity, nor low in both categories.

Bem felt limited by this conceptualization of masculinity and femininity. She perceived herself as possessing a number of masculine traits along with a number of feminine traits. In other words, she

felt that she should score high in both masculinity and femininity. Instead, when she was categorized, her score indicated that she was somewhere between masculinity and femininity and was thus viewed as neither feminine nor masculine.

Bem (1974) created a new method of measuring sex roles through the development of the Bem Sex Role Inventory. She suggested that masculinity and femininity are separate dimensions and that a person might be high in masculinity and low in femininity (masculine), low in masculinity and high in femininity (feminine), high in masculinity and high in femininity (androgynous), or low in masculinity and low in femininity (undifferentiated). This view is depicted below.



Although Bem's conceptualization may appear to be a fairly simplistic change, her perspective radically altered the way women and men were categorized. In the past, women and men were viewed as different because of biological traits. Bem suggests that a categorization should be based upon the extent to which a person has internalized societal standards for masculine and feminine behaviors. Thus, a biological male might have some highly feminine traits and a biological female might have some masculine traits. As sex became a psychological rather than a physical variable, researchers began to talk about gender rather than sex. Sex refers to biological differences between people; gender refers to internalized predispositions about masculine and feminine roles. These differences are critical for an understanding of gender and communication.

Communication Creates Gender

Communication is related to gender for two reasons. First, to a large extent, communication creates gender. Communicative exchanges identify roles and encourage or discourage the internalizing of predispositions that relate to masculinity or femininity. Symbolic interactionism, a theory originated by George Herbert Mead (1934), has important implications. Mead felt that people are actors, not reactors, and that they develop through three stages.

The preparatory phase is the stage in which infants imitate others by mirroring. The baby may sweep the floor, put on mommy's or daddy's shoes, or pat the dog. The child does not necessarily understand the imitated acts.

In the play stage, the child actually plays the role of others. She may pretend to be mommy, daddy, the postal carrier, a fire fighter, a nurse, or a doctor. Each role is played independently; the behaviors are not integrated into a single set of role behaviors. In other words, the child does not play a superwoman who is a mother, a wife, a runner, an airplane pilot, a writer, and a teacher.

In the game stage, the child generalizes a composite role by considering all others' definitions of self. The person thus develops a unified role in which he or she sees the self. This perception is the overall way that other people see the individual. People unify their self-concepts by internalizing this composite view. This self-picture emerges from years of symbolically interacting, or communicating, with others.

One's integrated self will tend toward the behaviors encouraged by others and will tend away from the behaviors discouraged by others. From the time of birth, persons are treated differently because of their genitalia. Male and female babies are dressed in different kinds and colors of clothing. Parents respond differently to male and female infants (Bell & Carver, 1980). Male and female babies are described with different adjectives: boys as strong, solid, and independent, but girls as loving, cute, and sweet. People describe identical behavior on the part of infants differently if they are told the infant is a "boy" or a "girl" (Condry & Condry, 1976). Preschool children observe commercials and cartoons on television, listen to stories, and play

with toys in which "appropriate" sex roles are depicted. In many ways, people are treated differently because of their biological sex.

Gender Is Related to Communicative Behaviors

A second way gender relates to communication is that gender influences the specific use of verbal and nonverbal codes. Different roles invite different languages. For example, terms like "bits," "ram," "rom," "motherboard," "modem," "memory," "monitor," "hard disk," "CPT," "CRT," and "CPU" are common in the language of computers. Similarly, words like "coma," "carcinoma," "cardiovascular," "chemotherapy," "colostomy," and "capillary" are common in the language of medicine.

Masculine and feminine individuals use different languages, and they put their words together differently. Someone may never have considered that sex roles place people in different subcultures, but psychological gender places persons in separate subcultures, just as race and age do. Furthermore, all subcultures create special languages. Adolescents, for instance, purposefully talk in ways their parents do not understand ("cool" and "neat" are replaced by "tubular," "groaty to the max," "I'm so sure," and "mega-hard," which in turn are supplanted by "rad" and "wick").

Feminine and masculine people similarly establish their own way of talking as a result of belonging to separate subcultures. Why do subcultures establish separate languages? At least two reasons may be offered: (1) A special language is developed in order for the subculture to conduct its function or business, and (2) A special language allows a subculture to symbolize its identity as a subculture. Feminine people may be more likely to know color terms such as "ecru" and "mauve" because they use these terms in their work, just as masculine types may use terms related to motors and engines in their work. Furthermore, feminine individuals might overuse adjectives to demonstrate that they are part of a feminine subgroup; masculine individuals may rely upon four-letter swear words to clarify their subculture.

A caveat is in order. When separate languages evolve from subcultures, the language is often understood by people belonging to other subcultures. Often people use the alternative language instead of the language of their own subculture. For example, traditional four-letter swear words are associated with masculine individuals, but feminine types understand the terms and may use them as well—but in the exclusive company of other feminine persons. Masculine individuals may not touch each other in a caring way in mixed company, but they certainly rely on hugging, patting, and touching on the football field.

Similarly, people may feel free to engage in out-of-role behavior when they are within the safety of an established relationship, but may not engage in out-of-role behavior in the company of acquaintances and strangers. Dindia, Fitzpatrick, and Williamson (1986), for instance, showed that wives are more likely to behave in a submissive manner with males to whom they were not married, yet they behaved in a dominant way with their own spouses.

What are a few of the differences between the two subcultures? Bonaguro and Pearson (1986) determined that feminine (not female) individuals are more animated than masculine (not male) and undifferentiated identities and that feminine types are more relaxed than are androgynous and masculine individuals. Feminine individuals are less argumentative than are masculine persons (Rancer & Dierks-Stewart, 1983). Feminine types are more likely to be relational, and masculine types are more apt to be goal-oriented (Serafini & Pearson, 1983). The feminine identity is generally higher than the masculine counterparts in empathy, caring, and nurturing (McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, & Gale, 1977). Finally, feminine females report that they self-disclose, or provide personal information, less than do androgynous females; and masculine men have lower disclosure scores than do androgynous men (Greenblatt, Hasenauer, & Freimuth, 1980). (For a comprehensive review of gender and sex differences in communication behaviors, see Pearson, 1985.)

WHAT PROBLEMS EXIST IN GENDER AND COMMUNICATION?

The area of gender and communication is in upheaval. Two major problems account for the difficulty in effective and appropriate communication across these subcultures. First, people still assume that gender and sex are synonyms. Second, people often confuse perceptions of behavior with actual behavior.

Gender and Sex Are Presumed Synonymous

Although gender and sex are highly related (men are more likely to be masculine than are women and women are more likely to be feminine than are men), they are not identical constructs. Furthermore, a great number of people are androgynous (possessing both masculine and feminine traits) or are undifferentiated (possessing neither masculine

nor feminine traits). Although gender and sex were never identical constructs, the two have become increasingly disparate in recent times. Recent changes have impacted the differences in the conceptions of gender and sex.

The roles of women and men are undergoing rapid changes, but society does not acknowledge these changes. To a great extent, people tend to live in the past. They behave on the basis of the naturalistic fallacy—"What is (or has been) is what should be."

The world has changed, and the result is an inability to keep up and to "know" people. People increasingly communicate with one another noninterpersonally (on the basis of cultural and sociological information) and categorize each other simplistically on the basis of surface or demographic cues (biological sex) rather than on knowing each other (on the basis of unique and idiosyncratic personal characteristics, including gender role).

In the past, people might have communicated only with members of their own community and family. They knew a great deal about those with whom they interacted. They knew that they do not talk about sex with their aunt, that they should hug their children, and that they should treat their students with respect. They might not have traveled to other cities, states, and nations. Today such travel is commonplace. Almost everyone is called upon to interact quickly with strangers and acquaintances in a wide variety of settings.

For a variety of reasons, people make errors in their assessments of one another in brief encounters. For instance, they may rely upon implicit personality theory, which suggests that one's own experience and assumptions about human nature are shared by others. They assume that everyone has a high achievement motivation and competes to win, and yet do not understand that many people develop a fear of success. They may make the fundamental attribution error, which is the tendency to underestimate situational influences on behavior and to attribute behavior totally to internal personal characteristics. They may assume that the bartender where they drink an occasional beer is cold and closed-mouthed, and may fail to recognize that the job description and possible negative past experiences with others in bars invite such decorum.

While interacting with one another, people are most likely to err, however, on the basis of four other errors in person perception. First, people err when they stereotype or apply a generalized belief about a group of people to individuals in that group without considering differences among group members. An example of this would be the assumption that all men are cold and unfeeling. A second error occurs when social roles are relied upon to categorize people. Here, the assumption is made that people possess characteristics based solely upon their roles in society—for instance, assuming that all mothers are nurturing. Third, people can make errors in logic when they assume that because a person has one characteristic, he or she will have other characteristics that "go with it." An example of this occurs when an observer assumes that women who dress like "ladies" will also talk like "ladies." Fourth, people can err by engaging in wishful thinking or by seeing others as they would like them to be rather than as they are. The assumption that all husbands will be good fathers is an example of this phenomenon.

Perceptions of Behavior Are Confused with Actual Behavior

As noted earlier, a second problem accounting for the difficulty in effective communication across subcultures occurs when perceptions of behavior are confused with actual behavior. In other words, a particular behavior may be viewed as negative when displayed by a woman, but judged to be positive when enacted by a man. For instance, a businesswoman might be labeled "aggressive, pushy, and argumentative," but her male counterpart may be viewed as "ambitious, assertive, and independent." Countless studies have demonstrated that when women and men were engaged in identical behavior, the behavior was devalued for women. For example, in a classic study Goldberg (1968) demonstrated that when an identical essay was attributed either to a woman or to a man, the essay was given a higher grade when respondents believed it to be written by a man, and a lower grade when respondents believed it to be written by a woman. Furthermore, in judging the essay, both women and men demonstrated their prejudice toward women.

One reason perceptions are confused with behaviors comes from the literature on gender and communication itself. Social science research can rely on self-perceptions, perceptions of others, or on actual behavioral observations. In some cases, people have relied upon the perceptions of others to determine how women and men communicate. For instance, people might have been asked if they believe that women or men speak more often. Although later behavioral research suggested that men talk more than women (Swacker, 1975), most people, when asked, guessed that women talk more than men. Similarly, in researching whether male or female managers are viewed as more successful, researchers have often asked subordinates and others in the

work environment. Although these individuals' perceptions might be valuable, they also may be value-laden, relying more on stereotypes than on actual observations.

Some researchers of gender and communication have relied upon individuals' self-reports, or self-perceptions. People have made estimates of their own communicative behaviors, but recent information indicates that self-reports may be based more on the individual's notions of an ideal or of a prototype than on the actual behaviors (Hample, 1984; Pavitt & Haight, 1986). Or, the person may be responding on the basis of social desirability. In addition, the passage of time often causes people to forget how they behaved (Sulloway & Christensen, 1983).

Recently, some researchers have turned to actual behavioral indices. They have begun to measure people's actual communicative behaviors to determine the extent to which women and men communicate differently or similarly. These research reports, although fewer in number than the studies relying upon perceptions or self-report data, suggest that the differences between women and men may be fewer than once believed, that they may be based on factors other than biological sex as suggested above, and that the rationale offered may be different from the rationale originally posited.

For example, if people are asked if women or men use more profanity and expletives, most would probably guess that men use more of these forms. However, Staley (1978) tested that commonsense view. She asked people between the ages of 18 and 47 to complete a questionnaire that listed a series of emotional situations. In each case, she asked the respondents to report the expletive they would use, to report the expletive they predicted a member of the opposite sex would use, and to define each expletive they provided. Surprisingly, she found that men and women averaged about the same number of expletives per questionnaire. She did find a great difference in predicted response, however. Men predicted far fewer expletives for women, and women predicted far more expletives for men. Both women and men judged the female expletive use as weaker than male expletive use, even when the terms were identical. Staley thus demonstrated that women and men may be more alike than different in the usage of expletives; nonetheless, people still perceive men's and women's behavior differently.

None of these methods of learning about gender and communication is inherently superior to another, but it should be noted that each provides different answers. Sometimes the researcher wishes to know how an individual perceives himself or herself. In other cases, the researcher may find others' perceptions of people as important. Often, the goal will be to determine the actual behavior people engage in. Always, the researcher must be certain that the means for making assessment is consistent with the research goal. Perhaps more important, caution must be exercised not to confuse perceptions with behaviors.

HOW CAN THE PROBLEMS OF GENDER AND COMMUNICATION BE SOLVED?

Can the dilemmas in the area of gender and communication be solved? They can if people are willing to engage in two practices. First, people must separate their perceptions of themselves or of other people from the behaviors that they or others exhibit. Second, sex and gender need to be viewed as distinctive constructs.

Separate Perceptions of Behaviors from Actual Behaviors

How one perceives and interprets another's behavior may vary dramatically from the actual behavior. When one observes, predicts, and evaluates the behavior of others, one must understand how attitudes, values, and perceptions intervene.

The area of organizational communication provides an example. Within the past decade, researchers have begun to examine the role of women as leaders and managers. In general, in organizational research, outcome variables, such as productivity, are used to determine the influence of independent variables, such as information availability, upward and downward communication, and openness. However, when researchers study the influence of a manager's gender in the organization, people's *perceptions* of the manager in his or her position are used. For instance, the topic of a study might be whether productivity increases or decreases when women serve as managers, but researchers ask people if they prefer to work for a man or a woman. This perception cannot accurately reflect productivity.

Research on gender and communication is no better. Too often researchers assume that male communication is standard. They begin with a male model of communication and then look at females' communication to see how it differs from males'. Or, they study women's communication in male contexts, such as the male workplace. They also assume

that women's behaviors determine their effectiveness. In other words, researchers do not take into account that women are often devalued simply because they are women. The most competent woman may be viewed negatively simply because she is a woman.

View Sex and Gender As Distinctive Constructs

Sex and gender need to be viewed differentially. Sex and gender are in the midst of a paradigm shift. Intercultural communication students are familiar with the notion of "passing," whereby members of lower status groups sometimes attempt to "pass" as members of higher status groups. Changes in social groupings encourage the consideration of "sex" and "gender" as separate constructs. No one can assume that women are "feminine" or that men are "masculine." In some instances, just the opposite is the case.

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